

This issue contains the results of a complex exercise by the editor of *ART and Australia*. It singles out domestic architecture (which, as several of the architects say, is Australia's best kind of architecture), it provides a comparison of the various Australian States, attempts a selection of good architects and then provides not only the illustrations but also comments from the architects in response to questions sent to them all.

Bringing such a selection together in this way has yielded a richness quite remote from the usual experience. Nevertheless, it is true to say that very few countries have such numerous examples (in proportion to their population) of outstanding works in this particular kind of building—the one-family house on a generous plot of land.

What an astonishingly silvan character Australia displays in these illustrations. How clearly the patronage for outstanding houses is an activity of those who seek out wooded, romantic sites on which to build. How responsive the architects are to those sites.

Plainly, no single vein of expression runs through these designs. There is no master or master group. Some family likenesses emerge from the widely held preference for brick, wood and tile, and some grouping could be done in terms of roof forms—the long horizontal eaves of Charlton or of Bell contrasting with the livelier shapes of Woolley or Madigan, for example. By those and other means it might be possible to tease out statements about regional characteristics, or about influences.

What can more confidently be said, though more difficult to describe, is that almost all of these houses share a striking degree of ingenuity—ingenuity which is serving life styles, rather than formalistic predilections. Almost without exception, each house holds surprises, manages uniqueness: the mysterious turning and angling which some plans of Col Madigan use; the gallery-like lighting of a Philip Cox room; the tree-trunk supported pyramid space within John Reid's house; the complex multi-level interior of Ken Woolley's. The most extreme among the ingenious expressions of life-style ideas are those in Robin Boyd's Featherston house—living platforms hanging free within a greenhouse—and in his Lyons house—rooms literally hung around the lip of a central swimming pool.

The sculptural confidence with wood plane and brick pier which shows in Charles Duncan's work, and the painterly skill with

concrete and stone bands in the house of Harry and Penelope Seidler (a house which is also a brilliant essay with interrelated levels) represent contributions of a different kind. They are closer to *styles*, in the sense used in the other visual arts (visually recognizable idiosyncrasies).

As for the words provided for this issue by the architects, the situation is the usual one which prevails among artists and architects; some confirm their work, others complement it because they have additional talents with language, and there are cases of surprise, too. The questions submitted to them by the editor were these:

1. What do you think of Australian domestic architecture?
2. Do you think it is appropriate to the country, climate and times?
3. What are your preferences for materials, and why?
4. Do you think it is possible for any control of aesthetics to be practicably introduced by authorities and, if so, how?
5. What architects in this country, if any, have influenced you for good?
6. Do you look upon architecture as an art form?

Most, as you will see, were quick to question what was meant by 'domestic architecture'. They insist that the suburban environment is mainly poor, and that the houses endured by most people cannot be praised. The kind which are displayed here, the very works of which these men are most proud, are also a source of some guilt for their designers. They are the 'one-off'—the tailor-made—which contribute so little to the total urban environment, and which are usually located in places of refuge from that environment.

Of course it can be said that the rarity of the gem is not surprising, and not specially Australian. Excellence in architecture seldom clusters conveniently, and can never afterwards be gathered in one place as can mobile works of art. The experience of searching out the best in any city of the world is a disheartening experience because of all that occurs between. For all that, these men are pointing to the fact that whole districts filled with good design, as has been managed in such places as Scandinavia, are just not to be found anywhere at all in this country. Aesthetic control appeals to a few of them as a contribution to a better urban scene, but most reject it vehemently: 'No, no', 'God forbid', 'Futile', 'Horrible', 'Advice maybe, but controls no', 'In theory it should help, in practice it does not'. Almost alone in

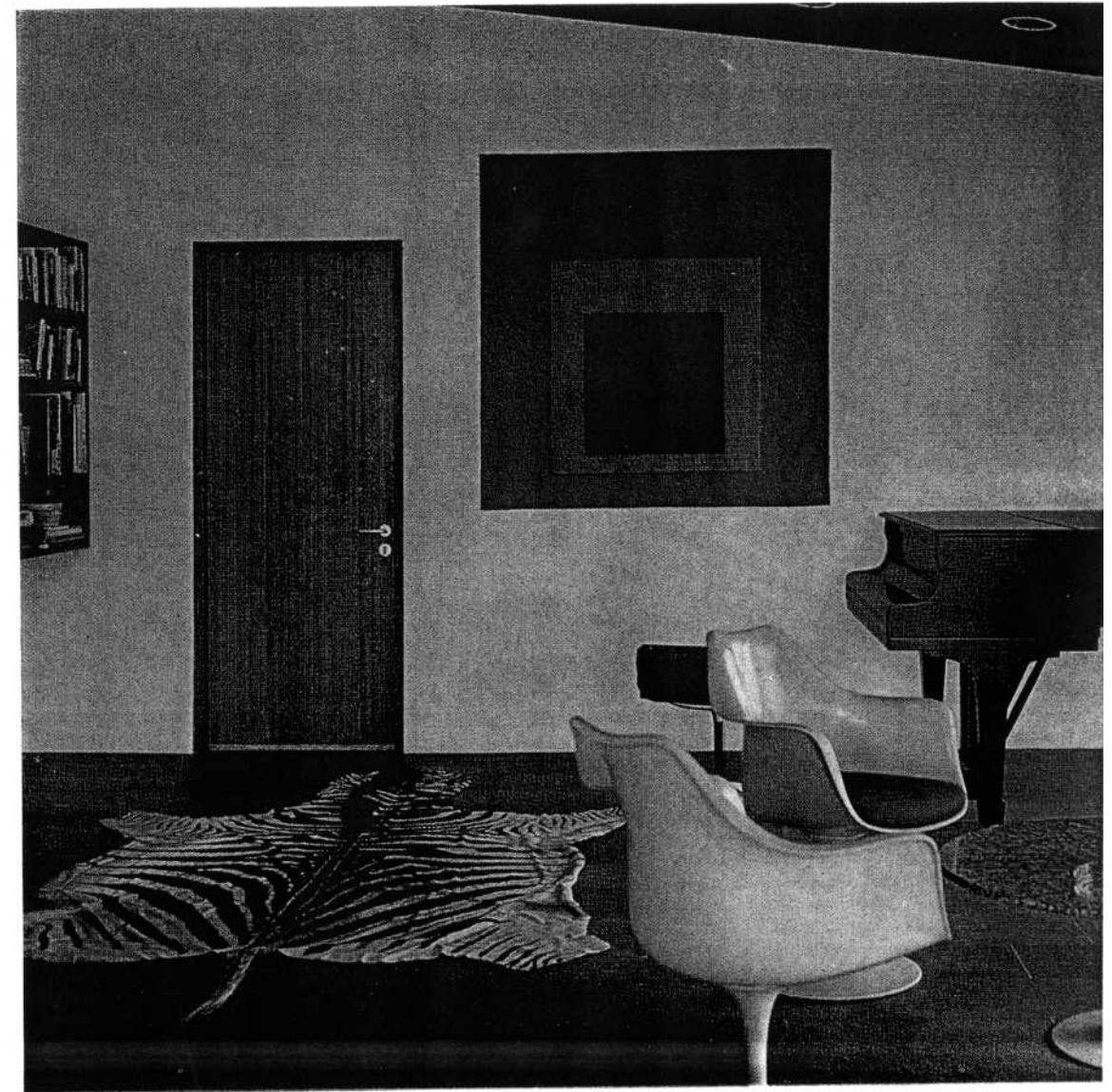
allowing generosity toward controls, Robin Boyd argues that in Canberra (residential areas, presumably) a measure of success has been demonstrated. His willingness to accept some controls is shared by Peter Overman, who suggests architect advisers to municipal councils.

The other overwhelming agreement across the continent is the preference in materials, the preference for what are called here 'natural', 'organic', 'craft' and 'traditional'. For most, this is the brick, timber and tile group. There are references to iron roofing, to asbestos cement and to concrete. Steel is mentioned once. If the choice is concerted, the reasons are various. Several are apologetic, conscious of 'this technological age'. A plea of cheapness is regularly entered on behalf of these materials. Some say they are open-minded about materials, but usually finish up with these. Others say it is a permanent love affair. Unusual comments are those of Harry Seidler, who prefers concrete and stone on grounds of permanence and heat capacity. Peter Muller mentions patina, which could well have been added to the statements of others whose statements are the more practical ones about materials which wear well.

This aspect, of the preference in materials, will very likely be the most striking one when this period is viewed in retrospect. Cost, personal inclinations, romantic leaning, or whatever, the fact is that the metals and plastics which in 1971 fill large chunks of the inhabited environment with such objects as planes, boats, computers, food packages, toys and sculptures—all of them with leading examples which are excellent and pleasing—hardly enter the construction of houses except by way of refrigerators and bench-tops. This situation is bound to change, and people have been saying for a long time that it will change, yet prophets of the subject are more timid now than they were in 1951.

The question 'Do you regard architecture as an art form?' raised—predictably—cautious responses. Note Boyd's, for example. In most replies it is made clear that architecture is more than art, perhaps therefore not art. It is more a technical service, it can be called a craft, it may also be a science. Several answers offer views of art, views which tend to dissolve the problem. The one which represents them all is Bill Lucas's, when he quotes a Balinese saying: 'We have no art, we just do everything as well as we can'.

In so far as 'art form' usually suggests *objects* of the visual arts, I think architects are clearly right to stick to the point that architecture is architecture. The strongest point in favour of its uniqueness is that, although its visual aspects are easily appreciated and often discussed separately, architecture's art is to be concerned with the aesthetic potential in all the experiences which buildings accommodate or offer, including moving, touching, and appreciation of remembered relationships.



JOSEF ALBERS FULL (1967) (on wall)
Tapestry 60in x 60in

JESU-RAPHAEL SOTO KINETIC SCULPTURE (1968) (on piano)
Stainless steel and plastic
Living-room of architects' own house at Killara, New South Wales
designed by Harry and Penelope Seidler
Photograph by Max Dupain

Harry Seidler

Australian Domestic Architecture: One hundred and fifty years ago it was significant – it embodied the cultural aspirations of an era, English Georgian, which was translated creatively into local terms. In this century, our geographic isolation has left us a long way aside from the mainstream of aesthetic developments in the western world.

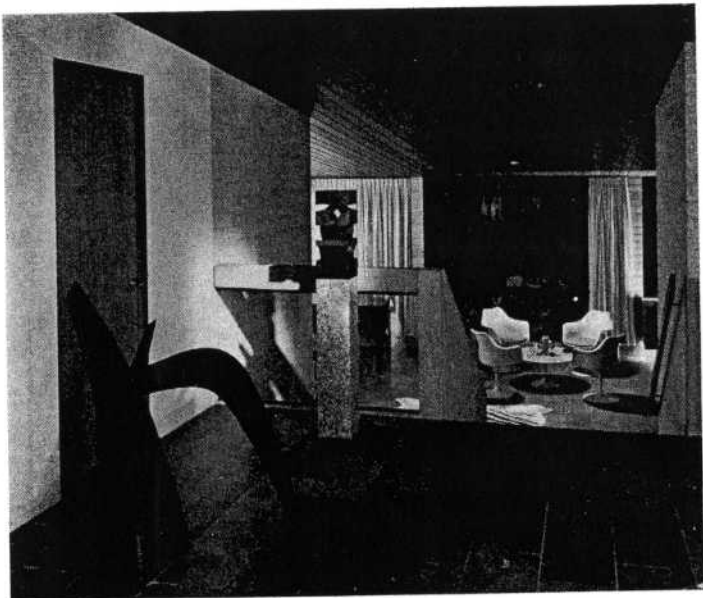
The spirit of modern architecture never really penetrated here – only shallow imitations and rather pompous and defensive notions that there is such a thing as a uniquely Australian architecture. If there is – it is all that is insensitive and pretentious. The general level of public taste is provincial and the rich build the most vulgar houses. If there is any saving grace – it is some of the standard houses put up by a few select Project Builders. They seem to have cut through the morass of an inefficient building industry to produce a worth-while average-man's house which is acceptable aesthetically and economic.

On Materials: Above all, solidity and permanence, materials which will not only perform structurally but will give the age-old comfortable feeling of indestructibility. The heat storage capacity makes solid concrete or stone ideal for the south-eastern Australian climate – not flimsy timber, steel, panels, and all the other senseless 'new' building materials being sold to us every Monday morning which do little other than cry out for constant repair and maintenance.

The Visual Task: The capturing and channelling of space within – it remains the most elusive and tantalizing visual aim – which, when achieved, makes architecture live. It imparts a sequence and flow to experiences which are at once intimate and infinite – the lure of a sense of the beyond combined with the repose of seclusion. Such space is the essence of today's aims which can never be sufficiently fulfilled even in a lifetime.

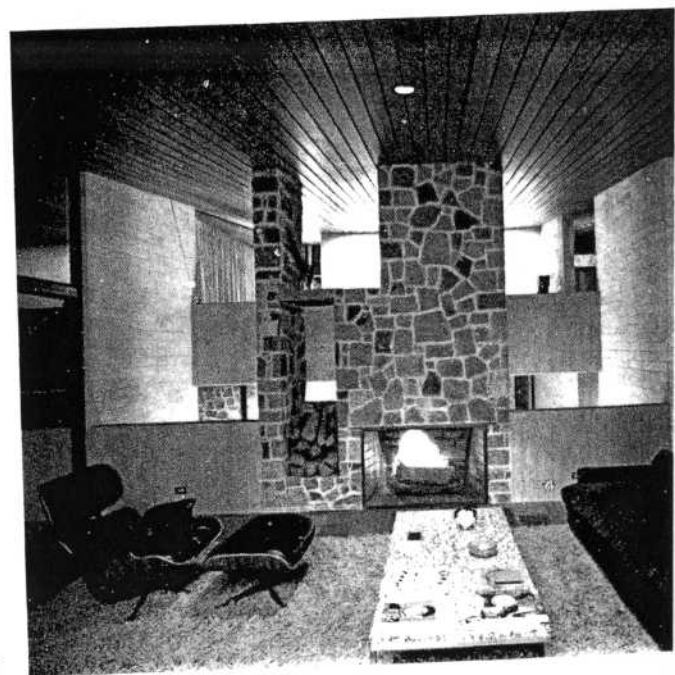
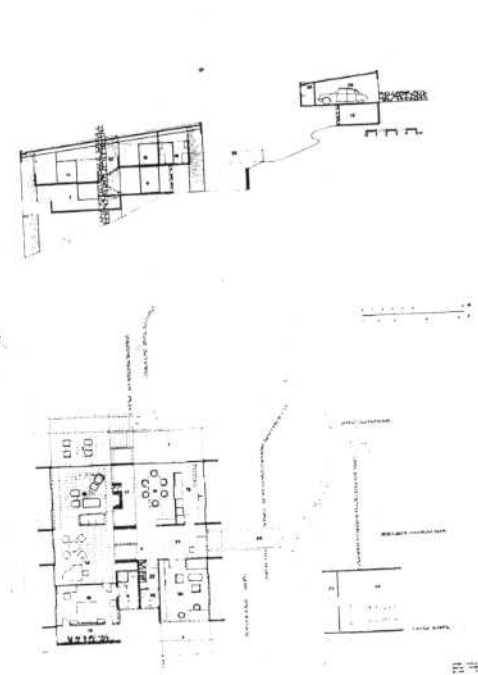
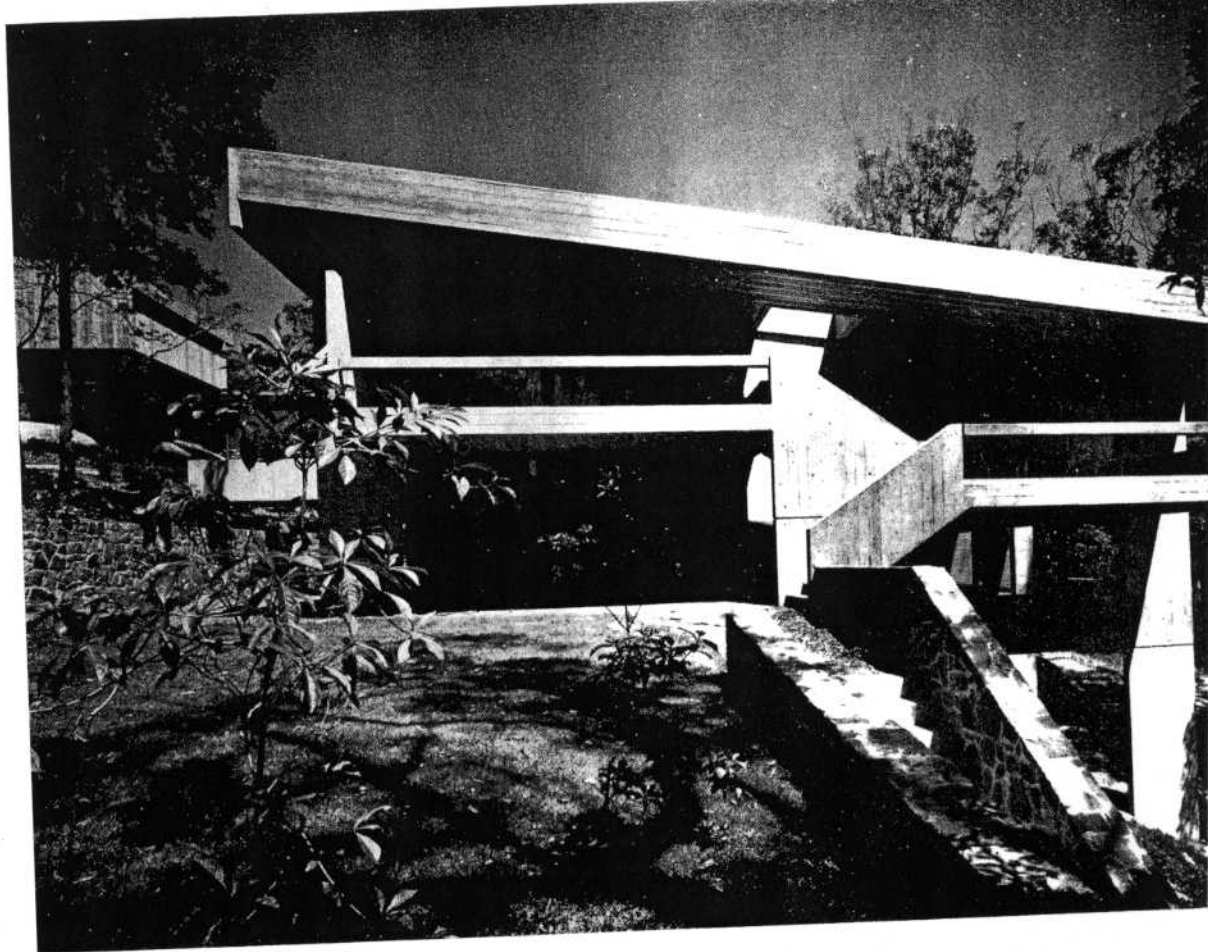
An Art Form? Architecture indeed is an art form – it always has been historically and always will be. As we judge past eras by their buildings so will we be judged by ours! Architecture is as a language – most speak in prose but others, with the same words, can make poetry.

The Authorities: Aesthetic control is futile; it will as often prevent the best as it may the worst. Twenty years ago I used to have to go to court repeatedly to have my house designs declared innocent. Aesthetic expression is a cultural matter, it will always be a thermometer of a people's sensitivities but it can never be legislated. What is needed desperately, however, is planning legislation and environmental control. In this sphere there is little but apathy and failure so far – we not only do not understand, but worse, we do not feel.



above and opposite
Architects' own house at Killara, New South Wales
Architects: Harry and Penelope Seidler

Photographs by Max Dupain
ART and Australia June 1971



Bryce Mortlock

What do I think of Australian domestic architecture? Do I think it is appropriate to the country, climate and times? It has been on the wrong track from the start. Because Australia was big, we assumed that space was unlimited, and that every house could be surrounded by broad acres. The broad acres shrank with increasing urbanization until they became the 3-ft setback from the side boundary. Instead of admitting defeat and exploring rational medium-density solutions such as row or town housing, local councils assumed the role of Canute, setting minimum site areas of 10,000 sq. ft and more, and increasing the boundary setbacks. The result has been to force more and more Australians into high-rise home units which they do not really want, there being no alternative in between. It is ironic to think that there is a Society vehemently dedicated to preserving Paddington, one of our few experiments in medium-density urban dwellings, while at the same time our building and planning regulations are expressly designed to prevent anything like Paddington's housing from being built today. (In Melbourne, for Paddington read Carlton). A few years ago we built a group of houses overlooking Rushcutters Bay which have been much admired as a solution to medium-density low-rise housing in a foreshore zone. Woollahra Municipal Council, in whose area they are, has since amended its setback and site coverage regulations so as effectively to prevent anything similar ever being built there again. If Australians put up with this, they deserve the home units they get.

What are my preferences for materials, and why?

I early developed a casual or maybe provincial taste for common unpretentious materials in domestic work – sawn timber, pine plywood, common brick, asbestos cement. I have never really shaken this off, although intellectually I believe that one should be ready to use whatever is durable, economical, and suitable to the building techniques available.

Do I think it is possible to control aesthetics officially?

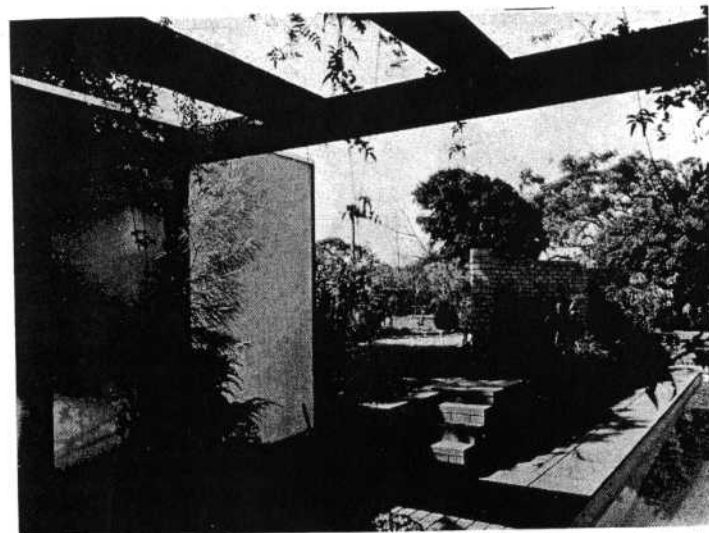
God forbid. Aesthetics is the science of people's likes and dislikes. I would prefer a world in which everybody shared my likes and dislikes, but I respect other people's right to be different, so long as they do me no physical harm. The last thing I would think of doing would be to impose my views by means of official aesthetic control. There are too many busy-bodies already.

What architects in this country have influenced me?

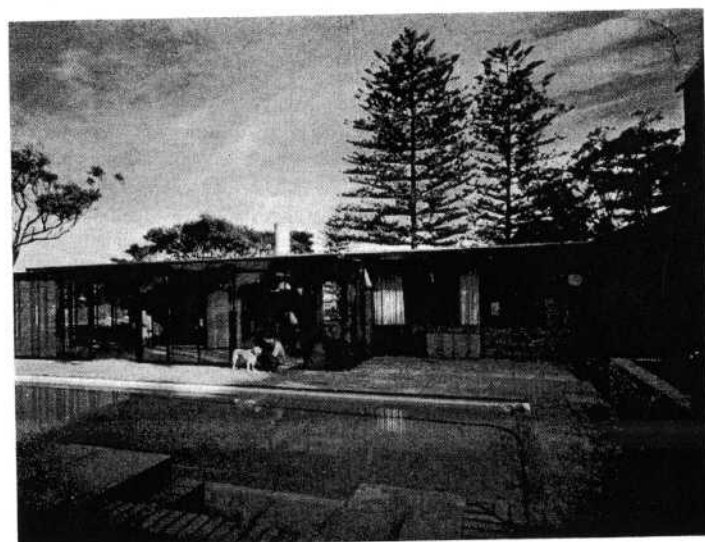
My mentor was Syd Anchor, although in retrospect his influence was more often by way of provocation than emulation.

Do I look upon architecture as an art form?

There is an element of art, however small, in all human artefacts. Art (*pace* Donald Brook) is what you like (or dislike, or admire, or hate, or feel drawn to, or revulsion from) in the works of man, not for any reason of necessity or even usefulness, but simply because you do. Insofar as one does things in architecture which have no functional basis but are nevertheless pleasing, then one makes it an art form.

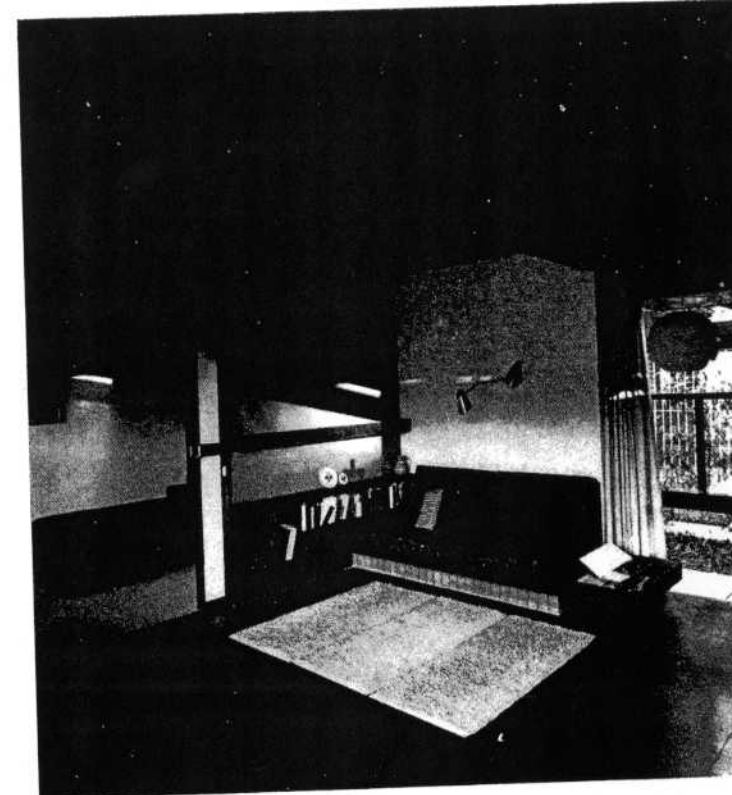
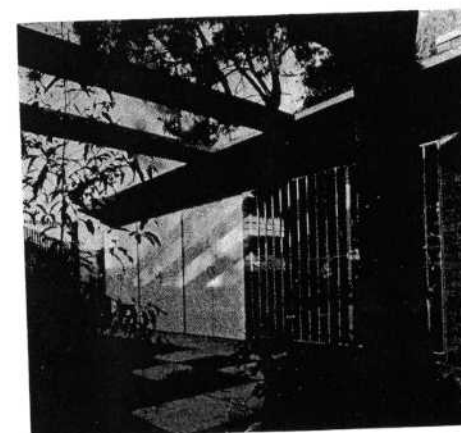


Marlborough Press Service



above
House at Cronulla, New South Wales
Architect: Bryce Mortlock

opposite
House at Collaroy, New South Wales, designed for Mrs E. E. Dix
Architect: Bryce Mortlock
Photographs by Max Dupain



Philip Cox & Associates

Domestic architecture, with its outbuildings, has been the most vital expression of all building forms in Australia. It is perhaps the only architectural type which can be called indigenous, deriving its basic form from the English Georgian and adapting it for climatic and social reasons into something quite distinctive. The vernacular prototype still seems to be a satisfactory form, and it is sad to see it not used more for the less studied or high-architectural types.

Recently, in 'studied' domestic architecture there seems to be a restlessness, a sense of exploration in material and form. In the case of Sydney architects, perhaps this is due to the unusual sites that are being given. The flat site, to our firm, is rare: our clients come to us with difficult sites which pose new solutions and approaches.

We are interested in the exploration of space within and outside the house adopting an open plan, exploring space with transparencies, both in wall surfaces and in roofs, and therefore involving light, shadow and sky.

We believe a house should always give ever-changing satisfaction, to enhance the quality of living and express twentieth-century pattern of life.

We do look on architecture as an art form as well as a science, but believe that the majority of housing undertaken in Australia is of a particularly low standard. The expressions of a few architects and their clients has had little effect on the great views of development.

The general suburban environment rises from one of extreme boredom to expressed vulgarity and this seems to be the general pattern of development set for some time to come.

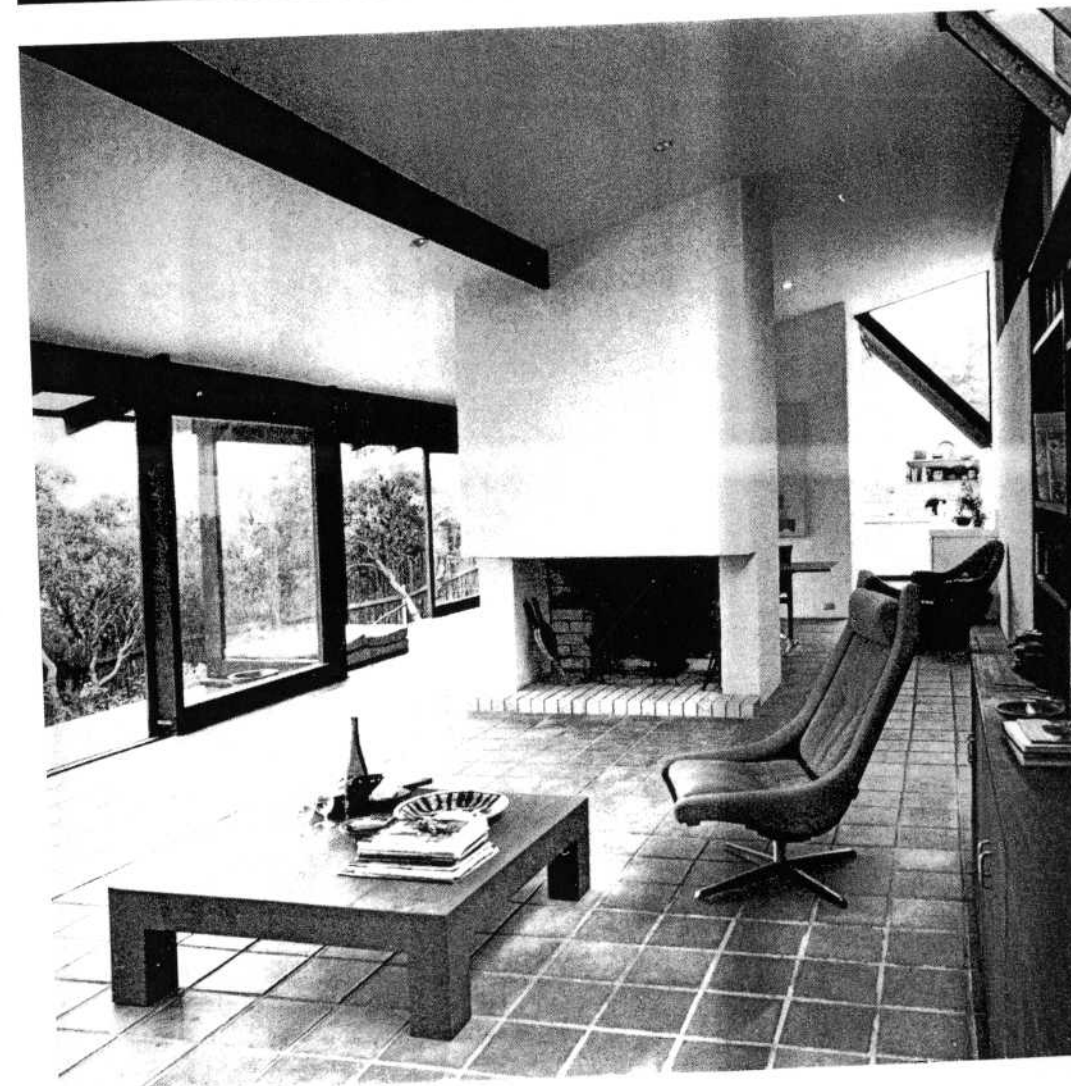
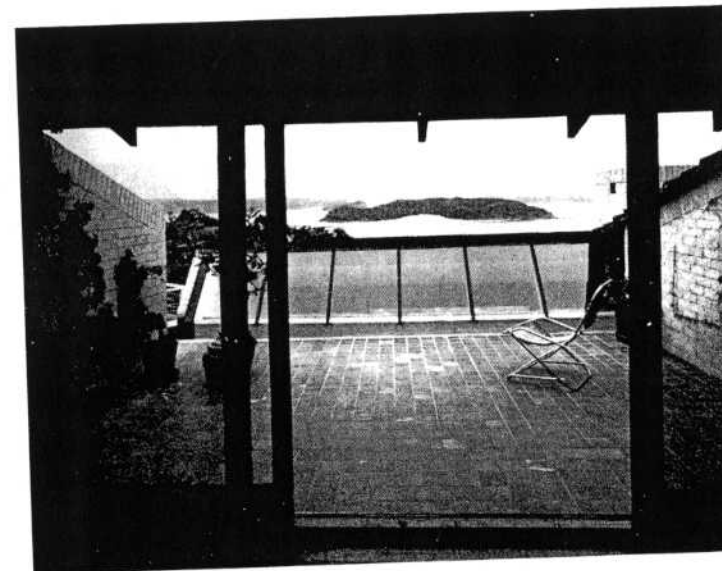
Perhaps more government control on aesthetics is the answer – or a general raising of education may achieve the same result, of great public awareness of the environment.

Costs force us to use traditional materials such as brick, timber, glass and tile. The use of concrete (which could lead to much exploration) is limited through cost. We are at present exploring low-cost mass housing for a project organization, which is a most exciting and challenging experience, as it is through this type of housing that we can contribute towards the improvement of the great bulk of the environment.



above and right
House at Pymble, New South Wales, designed for
Mr and Mrs R. Burgess
Architect: Philip Cox

opposite
House at Palm Beach, New South Wales, designed
for Mrs E. W. Ferguson
Architect: Philip Cox



Photographs by Wesley Stacy

Robin Boyd

Q. What do you think of Australian domestic architecture?

A. I think it is our best kind. More invention and imagination goes into houses than into bigger buildings. This is not because the architects in each category are so different but because their clients are. It is an almost unbreakable rule that the imagination spent on buildings varies in inverse ratio to the money spent.

Q. Do you think it is appropriate to the country, climate and times?

A. In the best examples it is. That is what makes them potentially the best, but imagination in the manipulation of structure and space is necessary on top of appropriateness.

Q. What are your preferences for materials and why?

A. Wood, steel, composites – because they are dry, and can be cut, bolted and worked freely. Concrete is nearly as good, because it has to take the shape dictated by dry forms. Bricks, plaster and most other wet materials are essentially mud-pie muck, but we often have to use them because of regulations and prejudice.

Q. Do you think it is possible for any control of aesthetics to be practically introduced by authorities and, if so, how?

A. It is very possible; in fact controls often apply now in a negative way. But Canberra shows how it can be done constructively and quite gently, and every city could have an equally strong design control committee. However, other cities need their own kinds, conscious of their own characters.

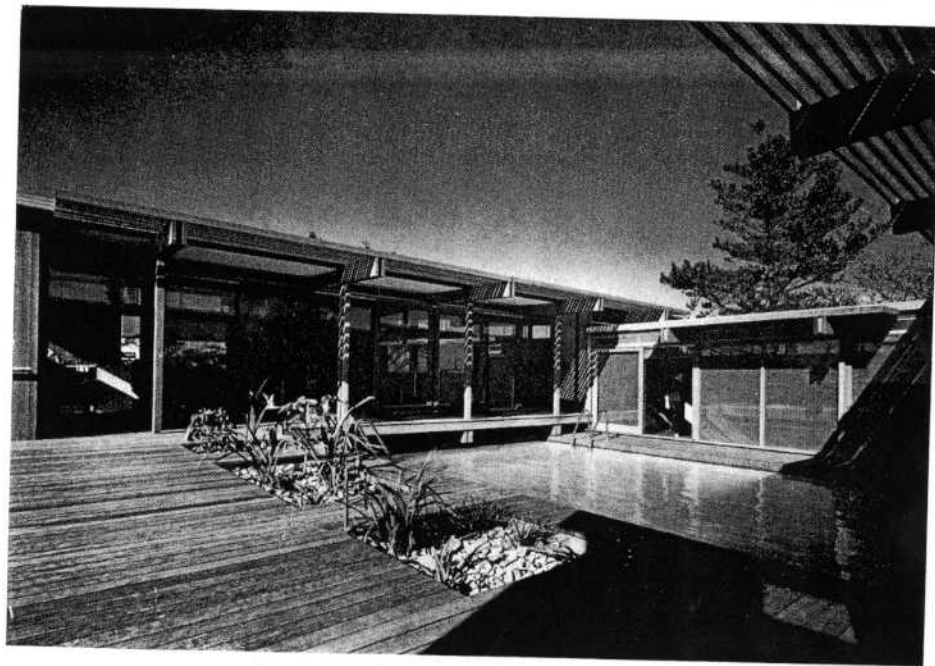
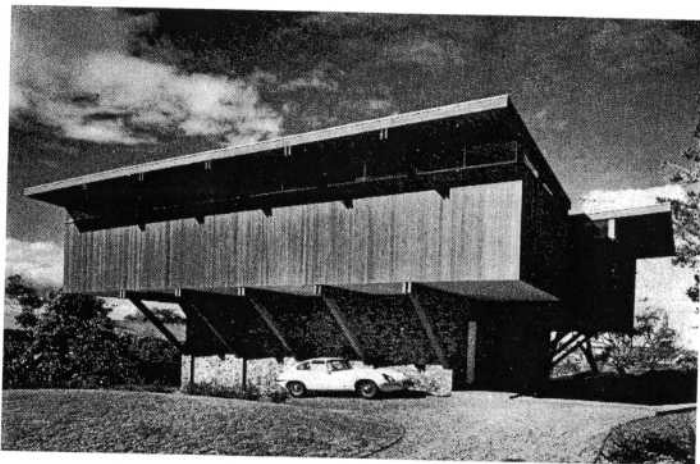
Q. What architects in this country, if any, have influenced you for good?

A. When I started in architecture Roy Grounds's work was an inspiration in simplicity and clarity of form. Nowadays, I think many of us learn from each other. There is more mutual

stimulation than ever before, and more mutual respect among architects, which is vitally important. I also am influenced constantly by the big commercial architects, who unerringly demonstrate what not to do.

Q. Do you look upon architecture as an art form?

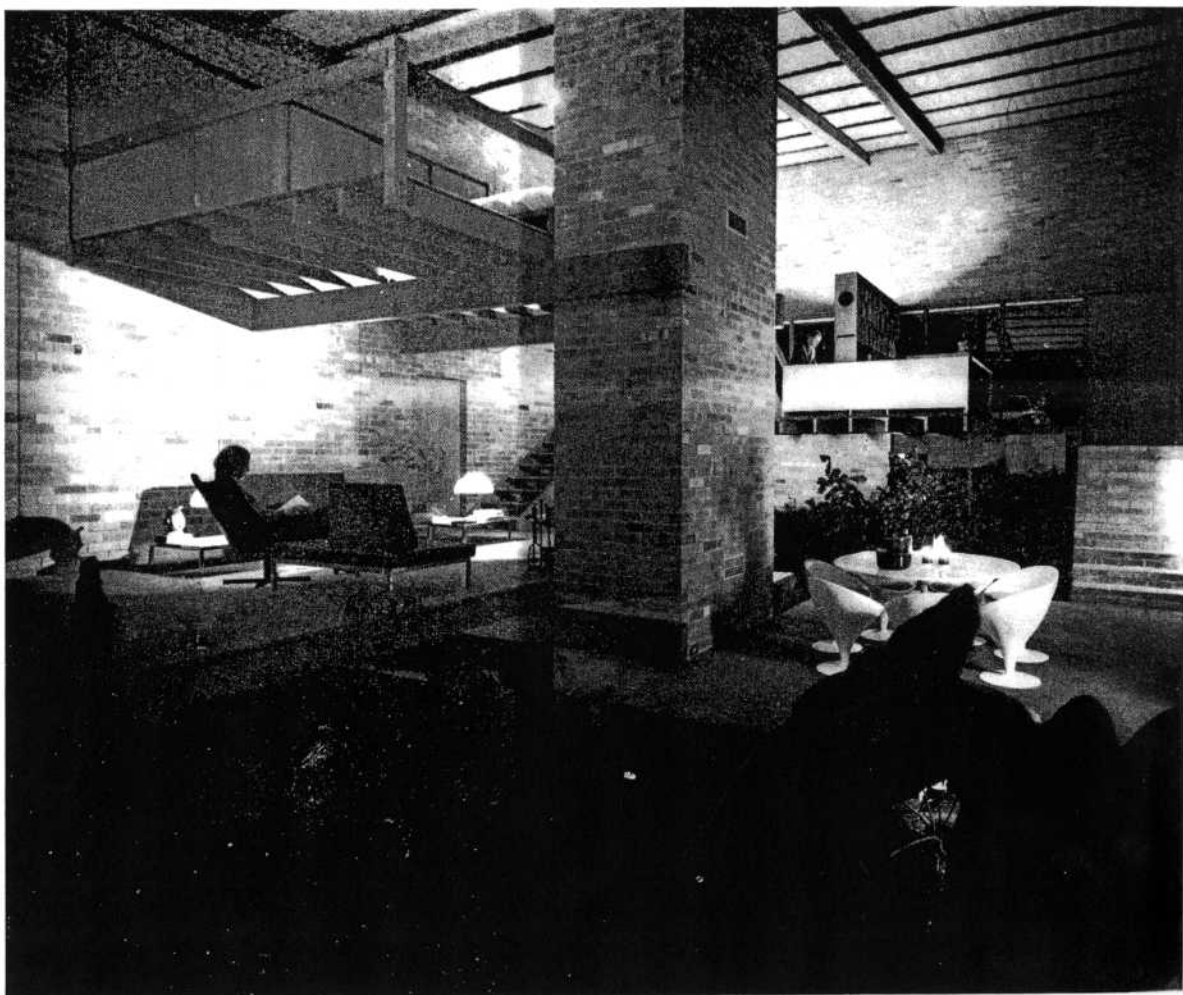
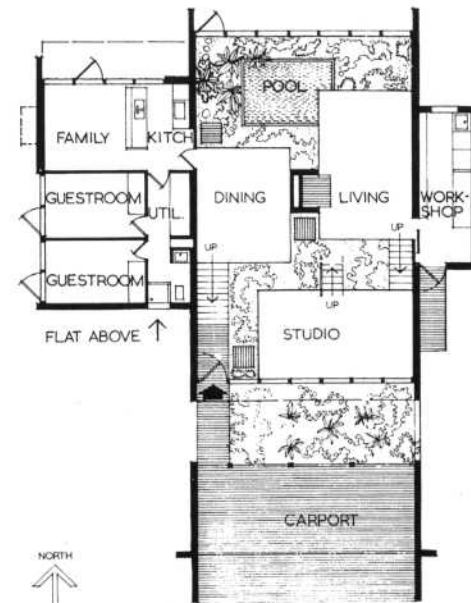
A. Do you mean there are others?



right
House in New South Wales designed for Dr and Mrs W. J. Lyons
Architect: Robin Boyd
Photographs by Max Dupain

opposite
House at Ivanhoe, Victoria, designed for Mr and Mrs Grant Featherston
Architect: Robin Boyd
Photographs by Mark Strizic

ART and Australia June 1971



Charles Duncan

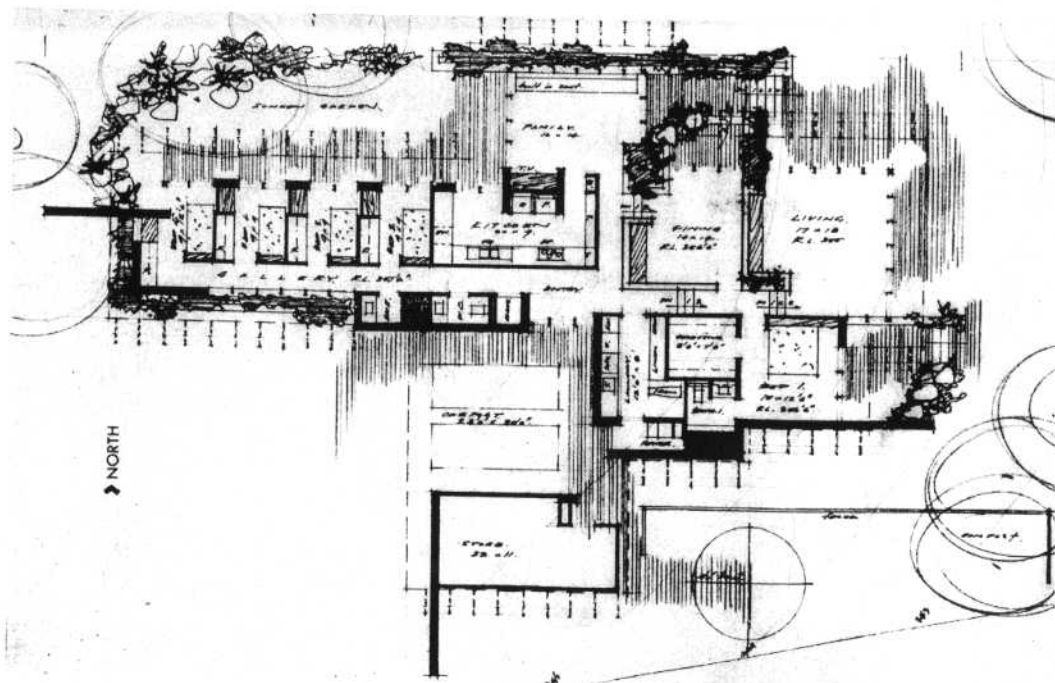
Domestic architecture in Australia is in its infancy. The day will come when architecture as a profession will dominate the domestic scene instead of the trade-like approach that has to be suffered by the community today. The community I refer to is the vast number of people who are not in a position to commission an architect and in some cases are not aware of the advantages of so doing.

One day soon, as today's younger generation arrive at 'building age', we will see the results of the conscious effort that is being made in many areas of secondary education to create a feeling for culture amongst today's children. Culture is the element that such few people have access to in today's rush and tear to acquire material possessions.

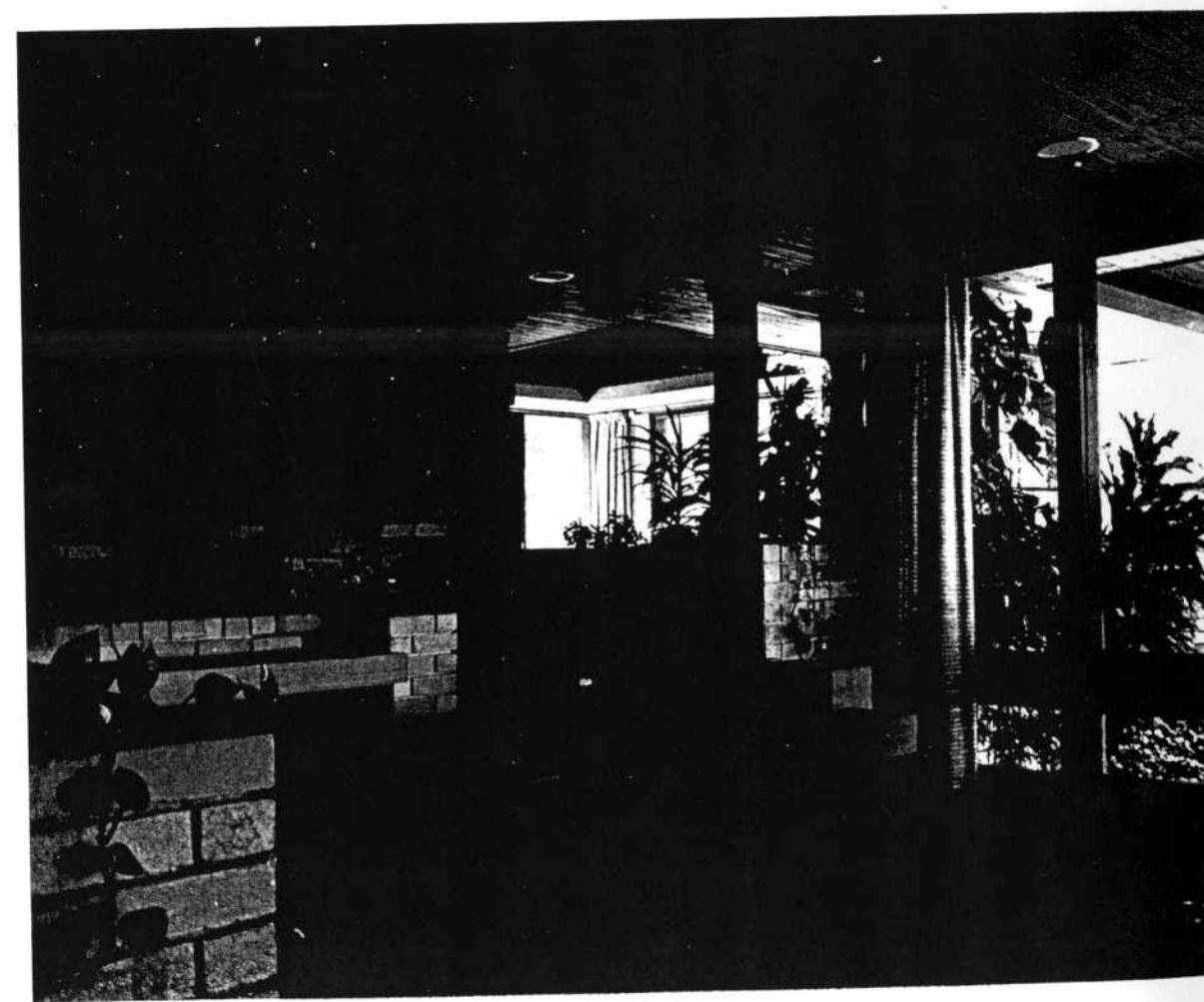
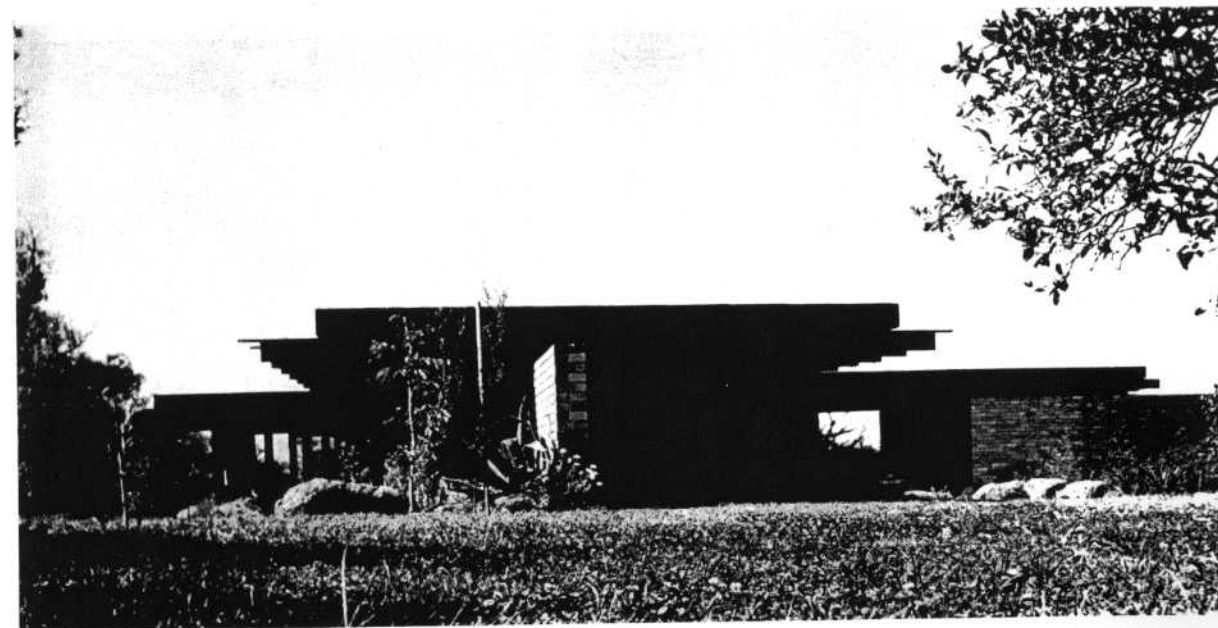
I myself hope for the day when all buildings are designed by architects, even if this has to be substantiated by regulation.

This will mean that architects will have the opportunity to subscribe to the well-being of great masses of people all at once, instead of labouring away on the individual house.

There is a hard core of architects that are influencing one another today. It is not just because we are using similar materials like brick, timber and stone, which are beautifully natural, but because we are using these and other somewhat aesthetically lesser materials such as galvanized iron, structural steel, concrete, et cetera, all in a natural way and with a consciousness of the fact that it is not the material that matters — it is the way it is put together and the overall concept of the building that is all important to the art in architecture.



above, left and opposite
House at Vermont, Victoria
Architect: Charles Duncan



Guilford Bell

Q. What do you think of Australian domestic architecture?

A. I feel that the best of domestic architecture in this country is of a high standard and compares favourably with that of other countries. However, it must be emphasized that only a very small proportion of all building can be classified as architecture. Much confusion of thought occurs regarding architecture and building and a prevalent and erroneous notion links inseparably the one with the other.

For some time this country has been enjoying a building explosion but, unfortunately, no such explosion has occurred in the art of architecture. Building is not necessarily begotten by architecture.

Q. Do you think it is appropriate to the country, climate and times?

A. The best of it, yes, the greater part of it, no. Improved world communications have long since stifled the development of the recognizably Australian architectural character which emerged with such promise long ago.

Today, many of our buildings merely echo those in other parts of the world, regardless of geographical position, climate, aspect and sociology, factors which should most condition design. Furthermore, widespread pretentiousness, encouraged by mass media, plays an important part in fostering the inappropriate.

Q. What are your preferences for materials and why?

A. Organic materials, durable materials long used and tried, materials which age satisfactorily.

The reason for this restricted preference, at a time when technology has given us a relatively unlimited choice of materials, is both aesthetic and practical.

On an aesthetic level, many of the new products are dishonest – plastics masquerading as timber, marble and even ceramics – whilst marketing of the huge range of materials deliberately fosters 'featurism', the greatest anti-architectural curse of our time. From a practical point of view, although planned obsolescence has become an indispensable factor of our economy and therefore influences the manufacture of many products, people are not yet acceptant of the idea that their houses should wear out.

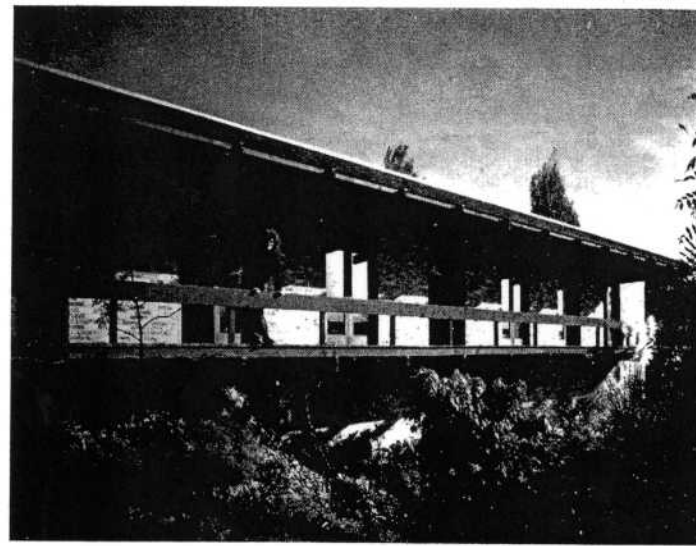
Q. Do you think it is possible for any control of aesthetics to be practicably introduced by authorities and, if so, how?

A. Fortunately no. The whole idea is horrifying. A new set of bureaucratic gods enforcing good taste? Better a cultural wilderness. One of the very few freedoms remaining to us is the freedom of aesthetic choice, and the only power which should be used towards its cultivation is the power of example.

Q. Do you look upon architecture as an art form?

A. Yes. But I feel that the art of architecture, as opposed to the business – or even the trade – of architecture, is practised too seldom. It should never be forgotten that qualifications do not make an architect, they only assist.

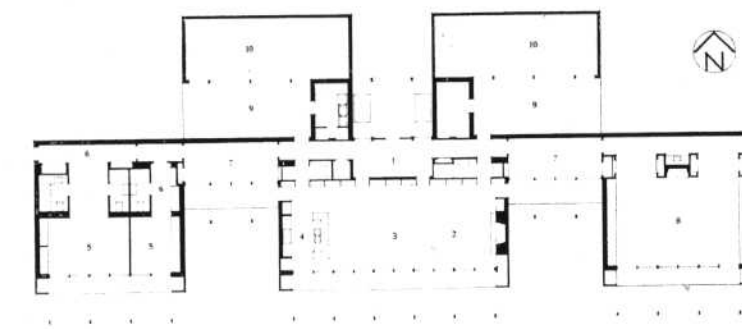
right
House at Bungendore, New South Wales, designed for Mr and Mrs David Gordon
Architect: Guilford Bell
Photographs by Max Dupain



House at Church Point, New South Wales, designed for Mr Reginald Livermore
Architect: Guilford Bell



ART and Australia June 1971



1. Entrance Hall 2. Sitting-room 3. Dining-room 4. Kitchen 5. Bedrooms
6. Dressing-rooms 7. Galleries 8. Studio 9. Carports 10. Service Courts



House at Kilcaire Heights, New South Wales, designed for Sir Russell and Lady Drysdale
Architect: Guilford Bell
Photographs by Max Dupain

Editorial

In May of this year a major architectural convention was held at Sydney, Australia. It was planned to mark the centenary of the formation of architectural institutes in Australia. The theme of the convention was 'The Consequences of Today'; it was organized as an attempt to define the human needs which our environment should meet and to examine the ways in which existing economic and political systems can satisfy these needs.

Eminent overseas visitors joined with local architects to exchange ideas, and interested members of the general public, as well as related institutions, were invited to participate. During the eight years of its publication *ART and Australia* has presented a number of articles on architectural subjects. Because of the importance of this convention we decided to devote the whole of Volume 9 Number 1 to architecture. We also decided to concentrate on domestic architecture, and only on houses. Overseas architects and town-planners have been scathing about most of our modern commercial and public buildings, except for a few, notably the State Office Block designed by the New South Wales Government Architect and his staff, Australia Square designed by Harry Seidler, the Water Board building designed by McConnel Smith and Johnson in Sydney and, in Melbourne, the State Offices designed by Yuncan Freeman. There seemed little point in featuring those few buildings, particularly as they have been much publicized already.

Domestic architecture, however, deserves notice for several reasons.

In the first place we are being forced to abandon to some degree the typically Australian attitude of one house for one family, each on its own little plot of land, and to move an increasing proportion of the community into flats, apartments, home-units or whatever other term may be used for such dwellings. The change has, on the whole, been architecturally disastrous but we cannot, in the space of this issue, concern ourselves with this aspect.

Secondly, recent years have seen the introduction of the project house. Again, readers will not find these houses illustrated in the magazine but many of the architects whose work is included have also been responsible for the excellent designs of so many of the houses commissioned by Project Builders. Amid the sea of ugliness that represents Australian suburbia we are becoming more and more aware of the increasing number of well-designed project houses. Unfortunately, however, all Project Builders do not employ good architects and it is only fair to mention

by name some of the companies that do and who, by so doing, are helping to improve the aesthetics as well as the function of Australian living. Pettit & Sevitt Constructions Pty Ltd and Civic Construction Co. (Aust.) in Sydney and Merchant Builders in Melbourne are Project Builders that come within this category. They provide a range of houses, from the low-cost to the expensive, designed by eminent architects and planned to suit a variety of sites.

Thirdly, houses concern us all. Most of us have little to say in the design of public or commercial buildings but we all have an influence, direct or indirect, on the houses in which we are to live, or visit, or look at.

The houses we illustrate are undoubtedly amongst the best designed for this country and would earn respect anywhere in the world. They have been designed to suit the needs of the client, to make best use of the site, to blend into the landscape, to gain the maximum benefit from the climate. They are not aggressive houses, demanding attention by their featurism, over-ornamentation (so characteristic of many Australian houses), but rather do they woo us – and win us.

We have been forced to become accustomed to, without in any way condoning, the harsh, burning texture-brick, the bright red or multi-coloured roofing tiles, large areas of unprotected glass, iron-railed, unsheltered terraces, together with a hundred (or is it a thousand) features – from patterned garage-doors to fancy letter-boxes. It is interesting to note that many of the houses illustrated in this number are festooned with vines or surrounded by trees and shrubs (either saved from the builder's axe or subsequently planted).

No study of domestic architecture in Australia would be complete without acknowledging the contribution of those few architects whose houses were exceptional in a time of even greater general mediocrity than exists today – Professor Leslie Wilkinson, Hardy Wilson, Arthur Baldwinson, Kenneth McConnel, Sydney Ancher and Walter Bunning in Sydney and Sir Roy Grounds in Melbourne.

We hope that, by assembling these statements and photographs, we shall introduce more people to good domestic architecture in Australia.